

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN COASTAL FISHING VILLAGES OF BINH DINH PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

Van Chai are traditional fishing associations in Binh Dinh province, mainly distributing in coastal areas. In spite of experiencing many ups and downs, suffering great impacts of market economic and cultural integration, these villages still exist until now. However, many cultural features of the Van Chai have been gradually lost and eroded. It is really pity without comprehensive assessments and wide propagandas in order that descendants understand and recover these values. One of these values is management of fishery resources.

Learning and experience of the Van Chai, especially their village regulations and customs in catching fishes and treatment to nature, benefits and so on are so worthy for scholars and managers to study and refer to. Appearance of this text is to generally assess coastal Van Chai in Binh Dinh province, to analyze forms of intangible cultural heritages of current Van Chai such as regulations, tradition rituals, professional rules, cultural heritages, belief, worship of Whale (Ca Ong); analyze and explain some traditional forms of fishing villages, practicable meanings in fishery resources protection in inshore areas as well as prevervation of aquatic types in Vietnamese and international red list.

Finally, some solutions to develop fishery in coastal Van Chai in Binh Dinh province have been proposed towards community management. To implement it, author has used several methods such as survey, interview, expert and inheritance together with new analyzing tools such as SWOT, relevant matrix to make issues obvious. Research results show that intangible traditional values of the Van Chai in managing fishery resources have been respective and remained the values till now. Co-management models of fishery resources have been based on the community at present. It is suggested that in near future, Binh Dinh province should learn and inherit traditional values and regulations for managing fishery resources of Van Chai.

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1. Overview

Binh Dinh is a central coastal province of Viet Nam, with a north-south coastline of 134 km. The narrow coastline, which averages 2 km in width, is characterized by sand banks and dunes, many lagoons (such as Tra O, Nuoc Ngot, Thi Nai), bays (Lang Mai, Quy Nhon, Vung Moi), and estuaries (Tam Quan, An Du, Ha Ra, De Gi and Quy Nhon). Since the distant past, the local population has earned a living by fishing, together with other types of production and emigration. Coastal villages in Binh Dinh Province have the specific cultural characteristics of those in central Viet Nam.

In coastal areas, islands and estuaries of Binh Dinh, fishers are usually organized in *van chai* in order that they may cooperate for mutual support in sharing fishing grounds and developing regulations for revenue distribution from fishing. Been faced with potential with calamity from storm at sea, with which their lives are intimately connected, fishermen put their faith in sea gods for support and protection. Nam Hai or Ca Ong (whale) is the deity especially worshipped and believed in by fishing communities. Such traditional cultural activities of the *van chai* have created an intangible cultural heritage that continues until the present in the coastal areas of Binh Dinh Province

2. Distribution of *van chai* in coastal areas of Binh Dinh

According to Tran Van Vinh and Tran Van Lang, in 2007 in the Binh Dinh Provincial Fishery Association, there was a total of 21 *van chai* in Binh Dinh Province. This number includes only those *van chai* associated with Nam Hai temples. Annual festivals are organized only in districts and towns which considered as strong *van chai*, like Quy Nhon Town (6), Phu Cat District (2), Phu My (6), Hoai Nhon District (7).

Table 1. List and number of *van chai* in coastal Binh Dinh Province

No.	Name of fishery's village	Commune	District	Note
01	Tran Phu	Tran Phu	Quy Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
02	Hai Cang	Hai Cang	Quy Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
03	Vạn Hưng Lương	Nhon Lý	Quy Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
04	Vạn Nhon Châu	Nhon Châu	Quy Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
05	Vạn Nhon Hải	Nhon Châu	Quy Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
06	Vạn Đồng Đa	Đồng Đa	Quy Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
07	Vạn Cát Tiến	Cát Tiến	Phù Cát	Temple to Nam Hai deity
08	An Quang	Cat Khanh	Phù Cát	Temple to Nam Hai deity
09	Tan Phung	My Tho	Phu My	Temple to Nam Hai deity
10	Vinh Loi	My Thanh	Phu My	Temple to Nam Hai deity
11	Phu Thu	My Đức	Phu My	Temple to Nam Hai deity
12	Vạn Xuan Thanh	My An	Phu My	Temple to Nam Hai deity
13	Vạn thôn 8	My Thang	Phu My	Temple to Nam Hai deity
14	Thon 9	My Thang	Phu My	Temple to Nam Hai deity
15	Lam Truc	Hoai Thanh	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
16	Thien Chanh 1	Tam Quan Bac	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
17	Thien Chanh 2	Tam Quan Bac	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
18	Truong Xuan	Tam Quan Bac	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
19	Kacong	Hoai Huong	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
20	Kim Giao	Hoai Hai	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity

21	Lo Dieu	Hoai My	Hoai Nhon	Temple to Nam Hai deity
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(Source: Tran Van Vinh and Nguyen Van Lang, Binh Dinh Fisheries Association, 2007)

Some general comment may be based on the geographical distribution of *van chai* in Binh Dinh Province, combined with a synthesis of information from other studies on *van chai* that have included foundation history, gears types, catch production, proportion of fishers in a village, geographical location. These are that:

- 100% of *van chai* with a Nam Hai temple and in an estuarine, insular, peninsula, or coastal location are known as “Ong” temple (whale temple);
- *van chai* are highly concentrated in the best developed fishing districts: Hoai Nhon District, Phu My District and Quy Nhon Town. These locations are associated with largest number of fishing vessels and their highly skilled fishers operate in diverse fishing grounds throughout the country, and so have contributed to expanding the fisheries production of Binh Dinh Province.
- The period when the temples were built is an indicator of when the *van chai* were founded, and provides a benchmark for the development of coastal fishing communities. In Binh Dinh Province, whale temples were founded in the 19th century.
- *Van chai* were founded voluntarily, and all financial contributions for building temples, worship and festivals were made by the fishers.
- The Ca Ong (whale) is a spirit symbol and worshipped in *van chai*.
- In each *van chai*, a *van truong* (headman) is elected as a leader by boat owners, and has to take the oath for his inauguration. He is empowered to make decisions on conflict resolution, to manage accidents caused by fishing vessels in the *van*, fishing ground division and profit sharing rules for *van* vessels operating in the same fishing ground.
- “Unharmed and good catch” festivals are held every year to pray to village deities before a fishing season starts, which demonstrates the aspiration of fishers for a peaceful and prosperous life, and particularly for high productivity and income.

3. Activities of fishing villages in coastal areas in Binh Dinh Province

3.1. Whale protection belief

Whales in a temple are worshiped solemnly. Everyone in a fishing village respects the whale as a deity, and calls it Nam Hai Than Ngu (Nam Hai deity). They pray for help during natural calamities, like storms. In particular they pray for safe fishing trips and a good catch.

Whale bones are worshiped in the temples called Ong Nam Hai temples (whale temples), built by members of a *van chai*. There are now approximately 500 packages of whale bones preserved in whale temples in Binh Dinh Province. They have different names as: Ong Luoc, Ong Kiem, Ca Ba, Ca Co, etc.

Many whale bones have been preserved in Ong temples (whale temple). Some of them are 30 m long and weigh more 10 tons. These bones represent various whale species and also include those of other cetaceans. Some bones are still intact and now they are in an Ong temple, for example at An Quang- Cat Khanh, Ong Temple - Tran Phu - Quy Nhon, Ong Temple- Hung Luong- Nhon Ly. Fishermen relate that a whale often helps people. If fishers caught by a storm, or fall overboard,, a whale supports either the boat of the fisher's body, and then takes it safely back to the shore. Since fishers believe that whales rescue and shelter them, the whale has become Deity of the Sea in many coastal villages.

Beached whales are returned to the sea. And fishers will render first aid and treatment to diseased whales or those attacked by other fishes. They care for a whale until it recovers, and move it back to the ocean.

When a dead whale is encountered (or if a whale dies in treatment) the man found the dead whale is names as the chairman of a funeral ceremony, which he must then organize. A dead whale is treated just like any human relative who has died. After three years, with another celebration the bones are disinterred and placed in a Nam Hai temple, where they then become an object of worship.

Some general characteristics can be discerned, based on our research on beliefs of fishing communities in coastal areas of Binh Dinh Province. These are that the:-

- Whale is a spirit symbol of life of littoral communities in Binh Dinh Province. The belief contributes to protection of the whale, which is recorded in the Red Book of Vietnam and the world.
- Whale bones kept in whale temples are important specimens for studying the whale species in Vietnamese waters.
- The belief in the ability of whales to rescue people will help enhance people's ethical sense, and instill in them the importance of taking pleasure in being friendly towards and to protect humans and animals. The belief also contributes to educating generations in coastal areas to be amicable towards each other and to work harmoniously together to minimize conflicts and quarreling.

3.2. Festivals to pray for a good harvest (cau Ngu festival)

Ong Nam Hai temple is not only a place where people save their souls, but also one used to celebrate cultural activities, especially festivals for praying for a good harvest. According to tradition, the festival originated in the 19th century.

- Cau Ngu festivals are characterized by the offering of sacrifices. People show the gratitude and respect to their deity. They pray for luck in life and safety when fishing.
- varying by *van chai*, the one festival may organized per year on 10th of April or May, according to the lunar calendar.

Sometimes, the whale is considered as a tutelary god of a *van chai* so that this ritual is performed as a ritual of the tutelary god or village god (*Thanh Hoang*). The offering is led by the core group of excellent fishermen carefully selected by the population, and known as *Ban Khanh Tiet*. These men are elders, of an honored status and heads of happy families. They have to practice kneeling for months, and eat vegetarian food. He has to keep his body clean and healthy during the three days prior to starting the ceremony. During praying they will be punished by *van chai* if they bow incorrectly.

This festival is held for 3 days and nights:

On the first day, they worship the ancestor tablet, then worship to welcome the deity and pray for safety.

The first ceremony, which called Vigil, usually starts early in the day. The aim is to notify and pray to the Sea Deity for omens in the year. This ceremony is performed solemnly, with three offers of wine and reading ovals. The oval praises the merits of whale because of its help to fishers.

The Nghinh Than ceremony, called also the Nghinh Ong Sanh or Nghinh Dong Hai Ngoc Lan ceremony is performed in some places both on the sea and on land (Nghinh Thuy Tuc). After that, they move to the temple in order to announce the offering to the Nam Hai deity. Then they invite all the spirits in the village to come there together.

There follows a sacrifice to appease the spirits. The offering includes rice soup, rice, salt, betel, and areca, wine and incense. To start praying, Ban Khanh Tiet knocks three times on a wooden bell, and offers and reads an oval. The oval shows the love and sympathy for unfortunate people who have died.

On the second day, the main ceremony starts at midnight. A pig's head, fruit and cake (no seafood) are used in this part. This mass is celebrated with many rituals, such as worship, oval, and praying for safety, luck and wealth. After that, fishers launch their boats to signify the start of a lucky catching season. This festival includes traditional games, and folk songs of the coastal villages. These are mandatory parts in the festival. *Ba Trao* is a kind of folk song in celebration. It is composed by many lyrics and dances with instruments named oars. The actors are oars and led by leaders. All of them stand to form a dragon boat - a holy boat - to take the whale deity to heaven. The meaning of this festival is praising and giving thanks to the whale deity, and praying for blessing.

Besides the offering, many other cultural activities with characteristics of coastal communities are held simultaneously. Some of them are masses and also festival. These make a festive atmosphere in villages. People play games, sing folk songs, and hold regattas. There is an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation regarding the new fishing season.

Based on the whale worship, this festival has important meanings:

- This harmonizes the belief and spirit of the inhabitants in coastal region. It lightens the hard life of the poor fishermen. It is also a time for people to rest and enjoy their lives after fishing.
- Cultural activities in a festival make them happy, excited and feel secure about the next fishing season. Moreover, these are occasions for them to thank the deities and their ancestors who contributed to the development of local fishing. These are also chances for all the villagers to get together.
- During Cau Ngu festivals, the unique and traditional characteristics of special belief in Binh Dinh are exposed to public view, and attracts tourists who visit to enjoy the special culture of coastal communities.

4. Remarks and Recommendations

Whale worship relates closely to the life and soul of van chài in Binh Dinh Province. It becomes a style of belief in communities and is meaningful in human life. Hence this integrates the intangible culture associated with values of humanity.

The whale has been protected and whale numbers will increase; because of this belief of fishers, whales are loved and venerated by fishing communities.

Intangible culture styles are shown skillfully in sea deity worshipping festivals. Ba Trao folk song performances are unusual and significant. All people wish to see this different style of regional culture. These occasions are organized annually by local governments

There is a need to preserve and improve traditional values and customs characteristic of *van chai*, as well as improve awareness of fishery resource protection and community living standards in Binh Dinh Province To do this several need to be focused on.

1. Further studies are needed provide recommendations for consolidating and developing *van chai* to better fit the current context. Particularly, studies on humanitarian values and community spirits/beliefs within the current fisheries management context should be given high priority,
2. In the development of policies and regulations for fishery management and for community/co-management, with which the Government of Viet Nam and donors are concerned must consider and learn from the basic values of traditional *van chai*.
3. The coastal regions where whale temples are located marked on resource protection maps as a basis for national whale protected areas. Fishermen should be empowered and supported with knowledge, equipments in rescuing whales.
4. Whale bones kept in temples should be studied. They are important data bases for classifying the whale species in Vietnamese waters.
5. Policies are needed for preserving and developing Cau Ngu festivals in *van chai*. It will celebrate the beauties of local culture, And provides a focus for cultural activities in communities. This is place where people could exchange their experiences and inter-communicate . Thus will be an effective place for promoting fish resources protection activities.
6. It recommend proposing that a suitable international body, like UNESCO, review and approve Cau Ngu festival as an intangible heritage of coastal fishing communities in Vietnam. This invaluable product of central coast of Viet Nam is the source of great local pride,, and one that we wish to share with the world.